

Yr. C, Proper 21
September 29, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1510 Words

Lessons: Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

The child of some good friends recently tried skydiving for her 21st birthday. I, myself, don't see any problem jumping out of a small airplane...*when it is parked in a hanger!* The problem lies somewhere between three feet and thirteen thousand feet. The problem lies somewhere between 0 M.P.H. and 100 M.P.H.

Somewhere within those numerical ranges our palms begin sweat...our stomachs begin to churn...and our grip begins to tighten around whatever helps us feel secure. For those of us who prefer adventures closer to earth at more modest speeds, we cannot imagine taking such a leap without being pushed.

The exact same principle applies when it comes to money. Most of us don't think twice about tossing out a small amount for charity—coins in the Salvation Army bell ringer's buckets...rounding up another dollar or two in the checkout line for a good cause...repeating whatever we pledged to our church last year...and the year before without thinking about it. We don't see any problem doing something small and manageable.

For most of us the problem lies somewhere between \$3 and \$300...or between \$300 and \$3000...or between \$3000 and \$30,000, depending upon our wealth. For most people, the problem lies somewhere between 1% and 10% of our income.

What is your threshold for when your palms sweat, your stomach churns, and your grip tightens on the wealth that makes you feel secure? Most people prefer to keep their adventures in philanthropy closer to the 1%. It is hard to imagine taking a larger leap without being pushed.

God already knows this about us. God knows we need to be pushed. Consider the prophet, Amos, whom we just heard. Now, we don't know our ancient Jewish history like we should, so I will paraphrase the fierce threat Amos issues to those who have a tight-fisted grip on their money.

“Alas, for those of you who are at ease with your lifestyle...those of you who feel secure with your income...those with nice warm beds...who enjoy High Definition TV from your couches after a nice meal...who enjoy live musical performances...and nice self-care products...but couldn't care less for the poor; *you* will be the first to lose *everything* in the next recession.”

I know that if *I pushed you* as hard as Amos is pushing...you would call the bishop...because none of us like to be pushed *that* hard. We don't want to be pushed too hard when it comes to our money.

We would rather hear nice stories about someone else's generosity. We'd like to feel good about how someone donated a kidney to save a stranger's life. Or how someone donated a generous scholarship to help a poor Haitian student pay for medical school. Or how people have given generously so our youth can have life-changing, mission experiences. *Those people* sit right here in these pews with us. And all those (and many other) anonymous stories should *inspire us all* to become more generous.

The truth is that we do not all have equal amounts of money, but we *do have equal amounts of opportunity to be generous*. You know, Jesus could have praised anyone for generosity. He *chose* to praise a poor widow who donated nothing more than a mite...because—for *her*—that was a leap of faith at 13,000 feet and 100 M.P.H. Her tiny gift was so outrageously big because she had so little to begin with. Her story should inspire us all to become more generous, but Jesus knows we also need to be pushed.

And so he told *this* story: A rich man ate very well every day. He had nice clothes. He enjoyed the privacy of a gated residence. He successfully managed to *overlook* people who were hungry and poor his *whole life*. “And then he died,” said Jesus.

That’s when the rich man finally *looked* and saw Lazarus. And it was too late. He had missed his equal opportunity to become more generous. You know what’s weird? *The rich man* became the beggar. “*Please* send Lazarus to help me,” he cried out. “*Please* send Lazarus to help my brothers,” he begged.

Do you see how Jesus is pushing us? Not really inspiring us with a feel-good story; but *pushing us*—like the prophet, Amos—with a fiercely challenging story. Jesus knows that *our problem* with letting go of our money lies somewhere between 3 feet and 13,000 feet, between 0 M.P.H. and 100 M.P.H.

Jesus knows that—for most of us—our sweaty, tight-fisted palms and churning stomachs get triggered somewhere on the low end between 1% and 10% of our income. Jesus knows how easy it is for us to overlook the poor *unless we are pushed*. It’s easy to overlook our equal opportunity to become generous unless we get pushed.

21-year-old Abby was buckled securely to the front of the professional sky diver. When the airplane reached 13,000 feet, they inched slowly, in tandem, to the wide doorway on the side of the fuselage. Someone nearby was videotaping those breathless moments with 100 M.P.H. winds whipping through the plane. Abby nodded her head that she was ready for her tandem sky diver to count to 3 and make the jump. On the videotape you can see him lean back with her and say, “one!” And then he pushed them out the door into the bright, blue sky.

Abby’s mom told me that this professional sky diver has learned over the years that some people lean back with him on the count of ‘one’ and then again on the count of ‘two,’ but then they *resist the push* on ‘three.’ He has learned that some people will not take the leap unless they are pushed...on the count of ‘one.’ *That* is the wisdom of the prophet, Amos; and of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Although we *want to be inspired*, we still *need to be pushed*...on the count of ‘one.’

We need to be challenged *not to overlook* the poor and hungry our whole lives. And what a great opportunity we all have *this Saturday* to not overlook the poor and hungry. We have the opportunity to be *pushed* to do something we probably would not choose to do by ourselves. We have the opportunity to get up off of our comfortable couches, and work together with our fellow parishioners and with neighbors we don’t know very well.

We have the opportunity to come together with folks with whom we don’t exactly see eye-to-eye, theologically speaking. And we nonetheless get to work together on the *one thing* that all the prophets and our Lord, Jesus Christ completely agree upon—that we should all respond *more generously* to the poor and the hungry, no matter what.

My job is to challenge you *not to overlook* your equal opportunities to be generous. It is *normal* to hold back, even though we sing, “All things come of thee, O Lord.” It is *tempting* to hold onto our money, even though we sing, “And of thine own have we given thee.” And so, all of today’s lessons are about keeping us honest with this prayer.

We know we’re going to make the house payment. We know we’re going to make the car payment. We know we’re going to make the credit card payment. And we know we need to be pushed to make a more generous “Love Payment...a more generous God Payment.”

St. Paul reminds Timothy that “we brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out of it.” He teaches us—like Amos and Jesus—that the love of money is dangerous for our souls. He *pushes* us to “do good, to be rich in good works...and to be generous and ready to share.” Paul pushes us to take the leap of faith—“to take hold of the life that *really is life*.”

And so, I will keep pushing you to give generously to the glory of God, and for the blessing of other people. I will keep pushing you to give your time, talent, and money more generously through and beyond this community. I’m pushing you to give to something you *already*, truly, believe in—the loving, life-giving ministry of Jesus Christ.

And I’m pushing you to take that leap of faith on the count of ‘one.’ If we wait for ‘two’ it might be too late. If we wait for ‘three’ most of us will tense up and resist even more.

I want to show you a book bag I received at the General Convention last summer. It is hung up in my office as a reminder for me to *push myself*. The quotation by philanthropist, Margaret Shepard, is printed on the side. “Sometimes the only available transportation is a leap of faith.”

When it comes to our money, this is so true. We are wired to hold back. We are tempted to hold tight.

Although we want to be *inspired* to become more generous; we still *need to be pushed*...on the account of one...*the* One who gave *everything*...for us and for our salvation.

Amen.